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Rachel Mason and Janet Cohen

The Subsistence-Flavored Ethnography of the Alaska Region

In Alaska, state and federal laws regulate the harvest of wild food for personal or family consumption. Controversy has flared for decades over the proper management of these subsistence harvests. The 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) gave a priority for subsistence harvests to rural residents. In 1989, a Ninth Circuit Court decision declared that under the Alaska constitution, all state residents should have equal access to harvests for personal use. Because of the state's failure to comply with federal law, the Federal Subsistence Management Program was established in 1990 to manage wildlife hunting on federal public lands under the terms of ANILCA. The program expanded in 1999 to include fisheries in navigable waters. As a federal landholder, the National Park Service is, with the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service, and Forest Service, one of the five lead agencies in the interagency Federal Subsistence Management Program.

Since its inception, the federal subsistence program has recognized the need for cultural anthropologists and their ethnographic expertise in documenting traditional uses of wild foods. In addition to ethnographic projects for specific park units, Park Service ethnographers are regularly asked to provide technical assistance to the federal program. Frequently this is rapid, policy-directed research that tends to synthesize and review other anthropologists' work. This article describes some of these research projects.

Customary and Traditional Uses

One such type of research is to collect and analyze data for Customary and Traditional (C&T) Use Determinations. Proposals for these determinations request that a particular community or group of communities within a

Fishwheel on the Yukon Charley River, Interior Alaska.

geographic area be identified as having C&T subsistence use of an individual resource; for example, brown bear, or resource category, such as all fresh water fish. A positive finding gives residents of the community a status as federally-qualified rural subsistence users. Typically, the analysis emphasizes past and present harvest levels and use areas, but also includes a range of ethnographic data as part of the factors used to evaluate eligibility as a Customary and Traditional resource user. These factors include, for example, information on traditional means of harvesting and processing food, handing down knowledge from generation to generation, sharing of subsistence foods, and reliance on a variety of fish and wildlife resources which provide substantial nutritional, economic, and cultural elements to the community. Research for C&T determinations depends heavily on the community profiles database and technical report series maintained by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence. The ethnographer completing the analysis does not work in isolation, but must coordinate with state and federal biologists as well as work closely with the proposal's proponents. C&T proposals, along with other regulatory proposals, are submitted by individual subsistence users, local advisory groups, tribal entities, government agencies, and special interest groups.

13.44 Permitting under ANILCA

Another type of ethnographic work assisting both park managers and the federal subsistence program identifies park resident zone communities and individuals eligible for 13.44 permits. The intent of Congress in ANILCA was to limit eligibility for subsistence activities in national parks to local rural residents with a personal or family history of using park resources. Resident zones authorize all permanent residents within these zones to participate in subsistence activities on NPS lands without a subsistence use permit. Section 13.44 of Title VIII, the portion of ANILCA dealing with subsistence, states that individuals who reside outside of the resident zone communities, who can demonstrate a customary and traditional use of park subsistence resources, may apply to the superintendent for a "13.44" permit allowing subsistence use activities within a park. Ethnographers also document traditional means of access to parks in order to help inform managers regarding issues of access and associated user conflicts. For example, airplanes are not typically considered a traditional means of access to subsistence resources, but in certain cases, such as the community of Yakutat's use of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, communities have been able to show that airplanes are the only practical and safe means of access to their traditional harvest areas.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

The Federal Subsistence Management Program oversees a Fisheries Research and Monitoring Program. One category of research that the program supports is the collection of Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Anthropologists work closely with subsistence users (elders and other knowledgeable harvesters) to document their lifelong observations about particular resources. This information, combined with western biological data, can help address subsistence management and resource conservation issues.

Ethnographic Overview and Assessment

As in other park service regions, Ethnographic Overview and Assessments (EOA) are carried out in Alaska parks. The objective here is to synthesize and summarize existing data and identify gaps in the available ethnographic information about groups affiliated with the parks. This study aims to enlighten park staff and others about affiliated groups and ethnographic needs. In recent years, Alaska Native tribes have played a larger role in designing and implementing these studies. For example, in the EOA currently being completed for Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, two of the communities associated with the park elected to produce their own community histories as part of the larger report. The remainder was conducted under a three-way contract with the Copper River Native Association, the regional tribal organization serving Ahtna villages in the Copper

River Basin. EOAs and other larger ethnographic studies, although not specifically designed to address subsistence management issues, can be and often are utilized to inform the regulatory process.

Consultation and Collaboration

Similar to anthropologists in other park service regions, much of our work does involve consultation and collaboration with the groups that policy decisions affect. Since most of the burning issues in Alaska have to do with subsistence, we are regularly brought into contact with tribes and Native corporations, formally established subsistence advisory groups, and a variety of organizations representing other groups whose use of wild foods for commercial or recreational purposes directly competes with subsistence uses. Many of our collaborations and consultations have short-term objectives related to management decisions. Of course, longer term relationships, or the potential for them, are also established. Because of contacts formed in the subsistence context, ethnographers are in a particularly good position to develop community partnerships and serve as a liaison between the public and the National Park Service.

Because of the need to focus on specific subsistence issues, we tend to concentrate research efforts on levels of harvest and resource use areas, rather than on other aspects of social life. This is not to say that we, or Alaska Natives, think of subsistence as primarily an economic activity. On the contrary, the harvest of wild foods is significant far beyond its nutritional or economic value; it is inseparable from other aspects of culture. The language of Title VIII (e.g., Sections 801 and 802) clearly shows ANILCA's intent to protect the subsistence way of life as a whole.

Woman processing bearded sealhide in northern Alaska.

Photos courtesy NPS Alaska Support Office.

Ethnographic Landscapes

The ethnography program has many links to the cultural landscapes program. Currently we are coordinating ethnographic projects with cultural landscape reports at Klondike-Gold Rush National Historical Park and at Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve. Additionally, the ethnographers and cultural landscapes staff are presently collaborating on an international study of ethnographic landscapes in the circumpolar north.

Conclusion

Many still consider Alaska the "Last Frontier" because of its vast stretches of remote and seemingly untouched wilderness. Alaska's size and the amount of park land make it a symbolic battleground for issues of preservation versus resource development. Ethnographers can make valuable contributions to wilderness planning efforts by, for example, reminding others that wilderness is itself a cultural construct. The federal subsistence program is mandated to give rural residents priority in harvesting subsistence foods. This priority can be a bone of contention both to wilderness defenders and to commercial developers.

Alaskan ethnographers have an important role in the federal subsistence program. In collaboration with scientists, managers, and local communities, we contribute information for short-term management decisions and conduct more conventional ethnographic research projects. Ultimately, all the types of research contribute to the broader and longer term goal of documenting, revealing, and preserving Native Alaskan and other subsistence lifeways.

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